VISUAL LITERACY: WORDS AND PICTURES

BY MARY BRAKE

British graphic designer and theorist Nigel Holmes has said that "Simple messages, straightforwardly presented without jargon and with some humour are better than earnest, data stuffed boxes with tiny graphics that look important but in fact glaze your eyes over."

While there is a time and place for earnest data and text stuffed boxes we can see too many of them in organisational life. We can be inundated with detail and feel overwhelmed with the complexity and competing demands of our work. In this detail and complexity critical messages can be lost along with the view of the whole and what really matters for people in the organisation.

Today, internal communications often sits alongside the Human Resources or people function, reflecting the importance of not only developing capability and skills but also of fostering staff engagement and building organisational alignment. Having compelling visual communication is an important part of those efforts.

There are times when information needs to stand out from the crowd and some may need to connect with the viewer/reader not only intellectually and but also emotionally. I will present a couple of principles that serve as foundations for my work in graphic recording and developing organisational graphics.

Using the Whole Brain

The first principle is that the visual display of information is a whole brain activity. Let's take the Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument (HBDI), with which you may be familiar with.

The Hermann Whole Brain Model, which categorises thinking styles into four quadrants, was first developed in the 1970s by Ned Hermann, then a manager at General Electric. The HBDI is a 120 question assessment used to evaluate and describe an individual's dominant thinking style(s). These thinking styles reveal preferences in the way we communicate, share information, make decisions, conduct our work and relate to others.

Developing visuals requires tapping into the four quadrants, not just the yellow Futures quadrant associated with the intuitive, synthesising, holistic and integrative thinking style favoured by the creative types. Also, organisation visuals must be accessible to a wide audience and so cater for each thinking style preference.

Facts

In developing visuals, my starting point is the Facts. What is the content that needs to be displayed? When I know the content, I can start thinking deeply about the visual display. We need to be communicating the right messages. When given text information, I often ask
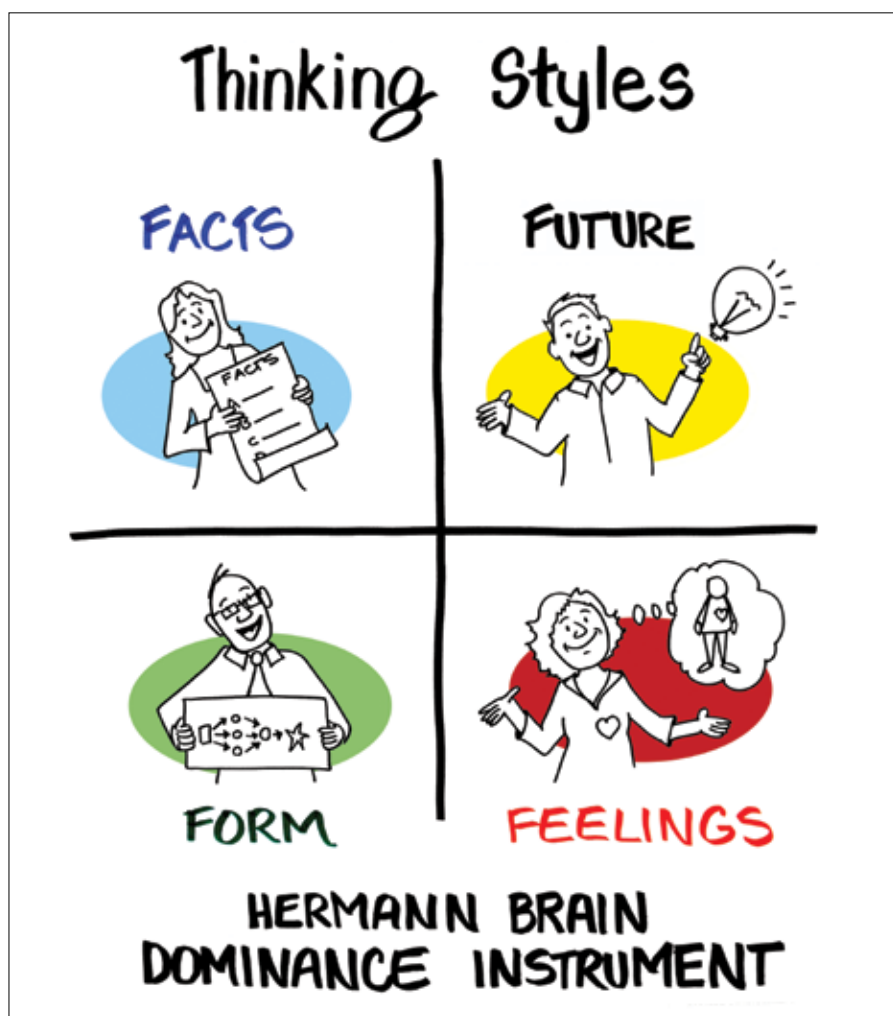
someone to talk me through it. Verbal language is usually far more expressive than the written text.

Form

Knowing the messaging, my next step is to go to Form in order to organise the information. I need to know if there is a sequence and what that sequence is. I am looking for patterns. Questions I ask myself are around what needs to be read first?, what is foundation information?, what information is associated together and which is separate?

Future

This then merges with Future. I want to show how the information comes together to provide a view of the big picture and I look for creative ways to present it. Sometimes that will be to extend peoples thinking about the messages. Perhaps they will see the information with fresh eyes or in a new light.

Feelings

I also want the images to tap into the Feelings, the human element of the messaging. Perhaps there is an image of a typical customer(s). Perhaps the images shows the relationship between people in the organisation rather than their functions. Perhaps an inanimate object (such as building) is given human form. Sometimes I will add quotes that personalise the messaging. Great language can be as visually evocative as an image.

Applying Visual Learning

The second underlying principle is to do my best to help people to easily see, understand and remember the content. We can look to visual learning theories or concepts for that, particularly concerning cognitive load, dual coding, schema or framework, linking or association and preattentive processing. These concepts are inter-related and here's a brief description of each.

- Cognitive load concerns the amount of data or information the brain can think about and learn at any one time. Ideally, we can process five to seven

items of new information.

- Dual coding relates to the use of both image and text as a means of better remembering information. If we activate more parts of the brain the more likely we will be able to remember it.
- Schema or framework says that using a logical framework aids understanding. When there is a clear schema the viewer doesn't waste thinking or processing time trying to understand how the graphic "works". Headings, sub headings, categories and flow need to be clear.
- Linking or association is another organising principle as we quickly notice similarities and differences. If we want people to notice that items are linked, we need to make the linkages clear. Colour can be used as a linking mechanism. Also, we can use associations to help people remember information.
- Preattentive processing concerns the information we can immediately
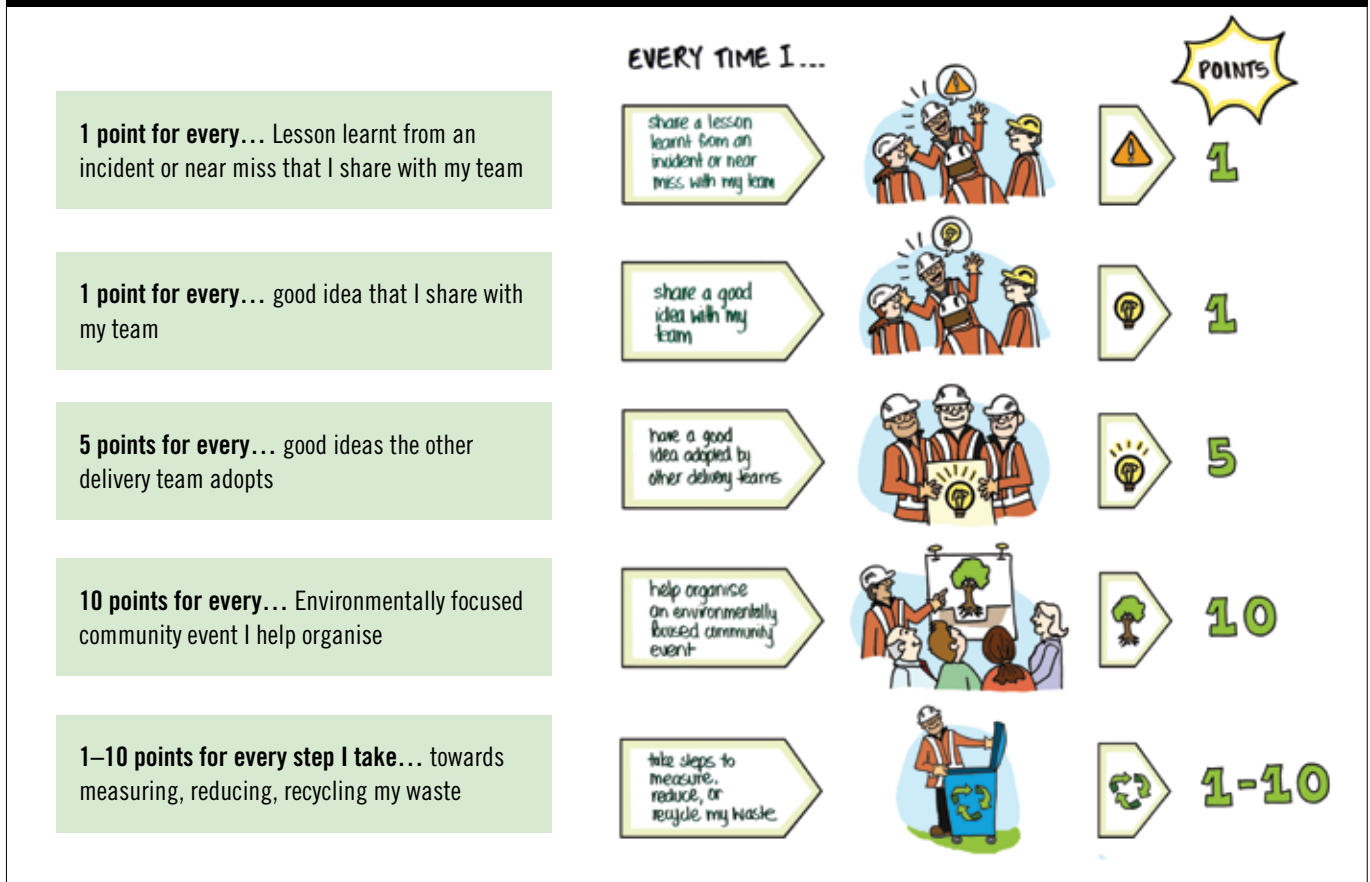
understand without having to process or think about it. Some information may be quickly recognisable when is it differentiated by colour, shape or orientation.

Basically, I want to reduce the amount of time that people need to take to figure out the visual. I want them to see as much of the information as they can at a glance, know how to navigate around it and I want to give them some tools that will make remembering it a whole lot easier. I also aim to provide the kind of graphics that will draw attention and be engaging to look at.

Visual Learning Tips:

- In reducing cognitive load, remove unnecessary words and take out repitition. Repetition is great for a speech (such as with Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech) but provides unnecessessary clutter for a visual.

1 point for every… Lesson learnt from an incident or near miss that I share with my team

1 point for every… good idea that I share with my team

5 points for every… good ideas the other delivery team adopts

10 points for every… Environmentally focused community event I help organise

1–10 points for every step I take… towards measuring, reducing, recycling my waste

EVERY TIME I…

POINTS

share a lesson learnt from an incident or near miss with my team — 1

share a good idea with my team — 1

have a good idea adopted by other delivery teams — 5

help organise an environmentally based community event — 10

take steps to measure, reduce, or recycle my waste — 1-10

- As a great speaker creates sound bites, look to ways to present information in "eye bites" so your eye can move from one piece to the next. Be aware of where you expect the eye to move. People generally look to images first and text second.
- Provide a consistent style in the icons or images used. Mixing different styles of icons, cartoon drawings and photos will create more visual clutter than you need.
- Keep to a simple and clear colour palate.
- Once you have developed a metaphor or visual story, run with it. At the same time, the metaphor must sit naturally with the topic and not be forced.
- Make sure the logic of the piece is clear. Create rules, eg, all numbers are in green, and stick to those rules. In the example above, I was given text information on the left that needed a little adjusting to make clearer and improve consistency. The first step was to remove the repetition. I switched the order as the behaviour leads to the points, not the other way around. I then developed workplace appropriate explanatory images to show the picture of the behaviour. To assist with learning and recall, I also took an icon from from each image to place in the arrow leading to the points earned.

Keep it Simple

I'll end with the first word of the quote from Nigel Holmes "Simple". Part of the elegance of great organisation visuals is the simplicity of them. They include only the words, lines colours and images (whether pictures or icons) that matter to get their message across.

References
Nigel Holmes, Harvard Communication Letter 2002, see www.nigelholmes.com
For those that may not know, a graphic recorder works at conferences, trainings and workshops to create large format graphics of presentations and discussion in real time and in view of the group. Words, images, colour and layout are used to develop a group memory or record of the content. See examples at www.reflectiongraphics.com. An international resource website is www.ifvp.org.
For the Herman Brain Dominance Model see www.herrmannsolutions.com

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